BROTHER TO BROTHER

Written By Craig Washington

"Who can love the perfect love, never short or thin?"

Nona Hendics

My earliest memory is a faded picture etched on the underside of my eyelids. I can only see it when I close my eyes and concentrate. Only then will the submerged image float up to the surface and sharpen. It is then I see him as always. His arm stretched just above my head. A giant door opens before me and I walk through. Then it fades out, like a 10 second clip from a fuzzy silent movie. No matter how many times I replay it, it always ends before we get outside. My brother and I. I only know for sure that we are going somewhere together and he is holding the door for me. I figure that I must have been small and very young because the handle is much taller than me.

Through hindsight, I can piece together where we may have been headed. The hallway outside of our one bedroom apartment opened out to Northern Boulevard, the main street of Corona, a small Queens neighborhood where I lived the first seven years of my life. Corona was a mix of blacks, Italians, Jews, and Puerto Ricans that at least tolerated each other well. It had been a haven for black musicians since the forties, and known as the place Louis Armstrong called home. Perhaps we were on our way to Mr. Walker's store to get as many sugar daddies and yankee doodles as we could for a dollar. Or maybe we were going to Tyson's barbershop where my brother recalls occasionally seeing a tall, bespectacled redbone man they called Malcolm. On the way, we might have said hello to Steve, a one-armed short sweet dark skinned man in his fifties with the open smile of a seven year old. We would have passed Stacey, our friend Lared's mother, a broom thin young woman with full beautiful lips who talked real fast and cussed all the time regardless of her mood or situation. "How ya'll doin?" she might say, cigarette dangling from her mocha painted bottom lip. "Y'all see that damn Lared? Tell him I'mo kick his ass when he get home. Alright , 'yall be good." It was a good time to grow up in Corona. There was very little on those streets that I feared because my brother always walked with me.

I trusted him fully and completely. So when I gave him my last nickel to go to the store and get me some devil dogs, I believed him when he came back telling me that a local gang roughed him and took that nickel. I was more shocked than angry when my mother came in from work asking who left the devil dog wrapper in front of the door. I somehow knew that I was his, that Kenny more than anyone was directly responsible for me. I used to wonder why he made me join the singing groups he would form even though I could not carry a tune. Sometimes he would berate me for not singing like Michael Jackson. We'd fight and I would quit only to return the next day straining to hit notes far beyond my reach. He was a gifted singer who certainly didn't need me there, as the other group members would tell him. But I was his brother and he would have it no other way. Years later he would stand up to my father during his first tirade about my homosexuality. For what seemed like a very long time, Kenny remained silent as I nervously awaited his response. And when Dad suggested that I see a psychiatrist in order to be cured, Kenny told him to get his own head examined for not accepting reality.
He was my first guardian.

Over the years our growing differences stretched and pulled our relationship thin. As a young man, I grew to accept my sexuality and integrate that self-affirmation along with the cultural pride our parents had instilled in us both. I began writing and performing poetry that narrated my experiences and viewpoints as a gay-identified black man. Kenny married and attended his wife's church where he eventually got saved. He stopped singing secular music and started leading praise and worship choirs. Soon after I had moved to Atlanta with my partner, I noticed that he had stopped inquiring about my personal life. He would still talk about how he and his wife were doing but when I would bring up my relationship he would grow quiet or change the subject. Weeks before a planned holiday visit, he told me that he was uncomfortable with me bringing my partner because we were leading a sinful lifestyle. During another stay, he took me to their church where I sat through an encore repudiation of homosexuality. Although we later discussed how we each felt about these matters, a festering resentment had taken root. I called less frequently and only visited if our parents would be there for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I was genuinely happy to see him then as we would joke and talk about music or movies. But whenever a friend asked me about him, I would focus on the gaps and ignore the ties between us.

My mother sounded almost calm on the recorded message that informed me of his car accident. He suffered a concussion and was partially paralyzed for months. Watching him in the hospital bed, I was reminded of how easily we could have lost him. My anger toward him paled in the stark light of my brother's mortality. After he healed, our relationship has resumed its same old course, so thus had my resentment. But something had changed. (Joni Mitchell never lies.) It became difficult to harbor this hardness in my heart. I took notice of every time he neglected to ask about my personal life or my activist work. But then I would remember how he told me he loved me at the end of every phone call. One evening he called after seeing Earth, Wind & Fire on a pop documentary and within minutes we were immersed in an hour long reminiscence about the music of our youth. We were two middle-aged men harkening the golden age of R&B and praising the slim crop of "real" singers among today's artists. And so it wasn't until the next day that I realized he had not asked me any of those questions that I thought he should be asking me, that I thought he would ask if I were straight. But he did inquire about the novel that I am writing. And as always, his parting words were "love you, man".

Every now and then I want him to express more interest in different aspects of my life. I want him to ask about last month's Clikque article or my work at Positive Impact. I want him to do things that he probably will never do. But if I continue to obsess about what he cannot give, then I will miss that which he can and does give. And so it seems that I am still learning through my brother that which I did not learn from the boyfriends who tried to love me, whom I could not love as they were. A very wise woman once wrote, "Who can love the perfect love, never short or thin?" So many years later, and he is still in some way holding open doors for me. Kenny and I are brothers who share a colorful common history and have made indelible imprints on each other's sense of self. We might never have the kind of emotional intimacy that I enjoy with my closest friends. But we do have a bond that is exclusively ours and it is no less precious. Years ago, my mother told me that in order to prevent my brother from resenting me, during her pregnancy, they would tell him they would come back from the hospital with his baby. Visitors who came to see me were quickly instructed to ask him if they could hold "his" baby. I like to imagine him at 3 years old allowing adults to pick me up. It makes me feel protected and loved.

Mr. Washington was lovingly raised by Anna and Leon Washington in Queens, New York and has lived in Atlanta for 11 years. His writings have been published in Clikque, Venus, Arise, Washington Blade, Southern Voice, Atlanta Voice, Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He currently serves as the Volunteer and Training Coordinator for Positive Impact, which provides mental health services for people affected by HIV. He can be reached at cwash360@cs.com.